**3.3 Classical Republicanism and Liberalism**

The contemporary civic republican interpretation carries with it what could be seen as an significant drawback, namely, it reduces dramatically the distance between classical republicanism and the mainstream liberal tradition. At one level, this should surprise no one. After all, classical republicans and classical liberals shared many political commitments (constitutionalism and the rule of law, for example), and many figures are regarded as central to both traditions (Montesquieu, for example). The difficulty arises, however, from the suggestion that on the new instrumental interpretation, republicanism for all intents and purposes collapses into liberalism (Herzog 1986; Haakonssen 1993; Patten 1996). Indeed, at one point in his *Political Liberalism*, Rawls explicitly states that his theory has “no fundamental opposition” with a non-perfectionist, instrumental interpretation of republicanism (1993, 205). What then could the advantage of civic republicanism over mainstream liberalism be?

The standard reply to this among contemporary civic republicans is to argue that there is indeed a connection between republicanism and liberalism, but that liberalism is “an impoverished or incoherent republicanism” (Viroli 2002, 61)—a bastard offshoot, so to speak, of what was originally a considerably more appealing political philosophy.

Republicanism does not collapse into liberalism if there is a real and substantial difference between the former's view of liberty as independence from arbitrary power, and the view of negative liberty as non-interference, generally embraced by the latter. Contemporary civic republicans, quite naturally, insist that there is. The significance of this difference will be easier to assess after the discussion below, but in the main it comes down to this: on the view of negative liberty as non-interference, any sort of public law or policy intervention counts by definition as an interference and, ergo, a reduction in freedom. Being committed to the received view of negative liberty, liberals thus tend to be overly hostile to government action.

On the republican view of political liberty, by contrast, public laws or policy interventions need not necessarily count as reductions in freedom. Provided that the law or policy is adopted and implemented in an appropriately non-arbitrary manner, the citizens' freedom remains untouched. Indeed, if the law or policy ameliorates dependency, or curtails the arbitrary powers some exercise over others in the community, the freedom of citizens may be enhanced. In the classical tradition, this idea was often expressed as the idea that, as Blackstone for example puts it, “laws, when prudently framed, are by no means subversive but rather introductive of liberty” and thus “where there is no law, there is no freedom” (1765, 122). The grounds for this view will be explained further below.